



President's Park
White House Visitor Center

The Burning of Washington

Hi! I'm Rosie Teverow, an intern for the National Park Service at President's Park in Washington, D.C. The following is a presentation on the burning of Washington in the War of 1812.

When George Washington picked out the swampy territory on the border of Virginia and Maryland to be the location of his new nation's capital, he couldn't have known the trouble it would take to reach the point of even being considered a city.

The government had been located in Philadelphia until that point, and in the city was where many wanted to stay.

Indeed, by 1800, Washington, D.C. was little more than a village with some large edifices.

There were only just over three thousand citizens living there then, (compared to the nearly forty thousand in Philadelphia by 1790), one fifth of whom were enslaved.

Pierre L'Enfant, the original city planner, had grandiose plans that hadn't been fully realized and instead had created an incompetent system of infrastructure.

The mess was appalling to foreigners, including visiting dignitaries, who were also repulsed by the behavior of the politicians.

It was said that Dolley Madison brought the first sense of sophistication to the city and redeemed the capital to some degree with her festive social events.

[QUOTE, NO NARRATION]

By 1810 there were about eight thousand two hundred people living in the city, nearly six thousand of whom were white, less than nine hundred of whom were free blacks, and the rest of whom were enslaved. [PIE CHART]

The city was growing, but it was still insignificant.

President James Madison, leader of the country during the War of 1812, had to deal with conflicting advice from his cabinet.

John Armstrong, the Secretary of War, refused to believe that the British would have anything to do with DC until after the fact, and therefore deliberately refused to take action. To further his point, he made disparaging remarks in attempts to discourage those who did take action.

James Monroe, the Secretary of State, wanted to be involved in the action himself. He tried to scout the British when they landed in the Bay, but forgot his spy glass and so was unable to report back with how many had arrived.

It was William Winder, a lawyer with no military experience, who was put in charge of the Washington militia. He was short on men, and the men he did have not only lacked experience, but also lacked money, weapons, and clothes. There was no support from the government because Armstrong couldn't comprehend the possibility of the city being under attack, so Winder was alone on all support fronts to defend the city from the incoming British.

The two ill-prepared armies met at Bladensburg, both consisting of starving and exhausted men who had been marching too long.

The Americans had some initial success, shooting several lines of British soldiers, but when the British soldiers kept coming, and marching toward them despite it all, the American militia got scared and turned heel.

Some men fled without taking a single shot, and many others died from heat exhaustion without a scratch.

When Commodore Josh Barney showed up, after having destroyed the ships of his navy so the British couldn't capture them, he was outraged at the reaction of his fellow Americans. He put up such a great fight that when he was finally captured by the British, they praised his bravery.

Having successfully pushed past Bladensburg, the British troops proceeded to march toward the capital where things were in a state of chaos. Ninety percent of the inhabitants fled before the British reached the city, including the president and his cabinet. By the time it was acknowledged that there was a problem, it was too late to take significant action. Citizens took wagons and carts to assist them in their flight, and refused to give them up to the government despite the consequences.

Because of this, the government was unable to save many of the important documents in the capital. Although a few diligent men managed to rescue some of the necessary papers (such as the Constitution and the Declaration) from within the Capitol and other public buildings, almost everything was left behind. [DECLARATION]

Dolley Madison, the fashionable first lady, refused to leave the White House, [DOLLEY] until Gilbert Stuart's life size portrait of George Washington was rescued. [PORTRAIT]

Dolley was quoted as saying "Under no circumstances allow it to fall into the hands of the British!" [QUOTE]

Prepared to reach a truce, General Robert Ross and Admiral George Cockburn led their troops into a mostly empty city on August 24, 1814.

Ross's horse was almost immediately shot out from under him, and all attempts to find the sniper were unsuccessful.

According to Martha Custis Peter, George Washington's granddaughter living in Georgetown, the man had been a "worthless hairdresser." Other rumors said that it was an unidentified woman who'd shot the gun.

Continuing on into the capital, the British were surprised by the splendor of the buildings.

Many soldiers were loath to destroy these magnificent edifices, and stood in awe of the soaring ceilings in the Capitol and the elegant decorations in all the buildings.

However, orders were orders, and after eating the extravagant lunch that had been set in the White House before the exodus, everything flammable was gathered into piles to build up the fires.

While the vaulted ceilings in the White House protected some areas from the fires, the flames were hot enough to melt glass, and the light from the burning city was supposedly bright enough for spectators on the surrounding hills to read by.

The British were very careful, however, to burn only public buildings and to leave private homes and individuals alone. When they caught their own soldiers looting they punished them severely, and they made a general policy of paying for the goods they took from people.

After watching the city burn for two days, the British moved on secretly, leaving a false trail to be sure they weren't followed.

They moved their way up towards Baltimore hoping for more great victories, but instead faced trouble on the river.

Fort Warburton, currently known as Fort Washington, had been easily defeated because the Americans had left without firing a shot. However, the British faced more trouble at Fort McHenry.

Even after the bombardment on September 13th, that continued well into the night, the thirty foot by forty-two foot American flag that Major George Armistead had asked Mary Pickersgill to make was still waving over the fort, prompting onlooker Francis Scott Key to pen the Star Spangled Banner.

Back in DC, citizens and politicians alike were returning to a scene of desolation. The Madisons stayed for about a year in the Octagon House, where James Madison signed the Treaty of Ghent, and never moved back into the White House.

There were debates about returning the capital to Philadelphia instead of trying to rebuild, but it was decided that if the capital was set on wheels, it would never stop moving. So Washington was rebuilt, slowly but surely, and continued to grow into what you see today. The White House is now part of the National Park Service, and on August 24, 2014, both will celebrate the 200th anniversary of the burning of Washington, whose scorch marks still scar the White House.

If you would like to find out more about any of the almost 400 sites of the National Park Service, please visit our website at www.nps.gov.